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CONCLUDING COMMENTS: COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN A COMPLEX WORLD

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As I write, the United States and the United Kingdom have begun their invasion of Iraq. Thus, the most developed forms of violence are being brought into relationship with some of the world's most complexly layered local identities—all on global television. The unpredictability of this situation points, I believe, to one of the more profound aspects of the post-Cold War order. How will past forms of ethnic and religious identification condition the course of the war? How will the memory of horrific violence change identifications, encouraging new ways for people to place themselves in the world, to become in fact a 'people'?

We do not know what will happen in the Middle East. Given all the usual caveats, examining what has happened in North-East Africa over the last decade may be useful, if only for sensitising ourselves to certain possibilities. As Günther Schlee usefully emphasises in his introduction, few areas of the globe have seen such dramatic shifts in local, state, and regional identities as North-East Africa. The exertion of violence has been a central element in this transformation. The preceding papers analyse various aspects of this process at various levels. Taken together, they illustrate the advantages of an approach—whether by social anthropologists or by political scientists—that traces out as precisely as it can the connections among levels, the resulting ironic juxtapositions, the unintended outcomes, from the global to the national to the grass-roots.

Before commenting on each paper, I think it would be helpful to step back and reflect on the history of how the issue of collective identity has been dealt with, particularly within social anthropology. In retrospect, I think many would point to 1969 and to the publication of Fredrik Barth's edited collection, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, as a significant transition. Before, most anthropologists tended to accept 'societies' and 'cultures' as givens. There were of course exceptions—Edmund Leach's analysis of highland Burma being one—but by and large, anthropologists proceeded upon the assumption that cultural boundaries and social actors' identifications with one side or another of such boundaries were unproblematic.

After Barth, this assumption has become increasingly difficult to make. Issues of identification have increasingly come to the fore, so

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much so that Barth's collection is, literally, one of the most cited works in the whole social science literature.

If this is so, the analyses in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* strike us today with a kind of wistful simplicity. Perhaps this is the fate of all seminal works that provoke the production of whole literatures. Barth and his collaborators present rich examinations of local processes, but they tend to neglect the operation of the modern state set within a global context (see Verdery, 1994; Barth, 1994). In most areas of the world today, the state is far more visible for anthropologists—in a few areas, only for its lack and the anxiety that this produces. The modern state itself classifies people in terms of their identities: it conducts censuses; it draws maps and boundaries; it establishes social welfare programmes. This 'official' identity work conditions local social and cultural processes, whether by reinforcing or contradicting them.

Analysis cannot rest at the level of the state, however. Beyond the state, there are yet farther-flung patterns and structures that affect local processes, many of which anthropologists and others have recently begun to label as instances of the 'global'. When, for example, United Nations bureaucrats in New York decide exactly who can and cannot be counted as a refugee, they critically affect processes of local identity formation in places such as Ethiopia. Or take the example of international links between so-called First Nation peoples. The connections between native Americans, Australian aborigines, and Brazilian Indians have begun to affect how local people see themselves *vis-à-vis* their respective states.

This brief summary is enough, I think, to establish just how complex a world we confront when we take up the issue of collective identity. Local peoples have their classification, but states do as well. These may or may not coincide, reinforce, or contradict one another. And beyond states, various transnational bodies also have their classifications which, once again, may or may not coincide with those of states and local peoples. The intricacy of the possible combinations and permutations threatens to overwhelm. We begin to feel a little like Alice in Wonderland. Gaining a ground in this whirl requires, as these papers illustrate, a systematic account of connections among analytical levels, from the global to the national, from the national to the regional, from the regional to the grass-roots.

Let me turn to each paper in turn. In Günther Schlee's essay, we see a deconstruction both of the nationalist ideal of cultural homogeneity and of the role of scholars, both African and Western, in contributing to that imaginary. In the context of North-East Africa, Schlee demonstrates that cultural homogeneity did not automatically produce a unified political identity nor did cultural differences necessarily lead to conflict. Rather, in each case, it was the particular context in which social actors invoked cultural homogeneity or difference that was decisive. For example, the recent war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, fuelled by international access to arms in various directions, conditioned various lower-level ethnic conflicts—this for the simple reason that Eritrea began to support Ethiopia's enemies, whoever and

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wherever they were, and Ethiopia did the same, in reverse. In consequence, a recognisable pattern emerges in which ethnic and national processes systematically interrelate and affect one another.

Richard Reid takes up the issue of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in detail. What Reid shows is that the war was bound up with the difficulty that both Ethiopia and Eritrea had in defining themselves as 'peoples'. For Eritreans, the case was perhaps more straightforward, at least on the surface, since they claimed only what most African states had realised decades before, namely, the right to liberate themselves from colonial rule (never mind the long-expressed complaint that colonial boundaries were artificial and thus responsible for post-colonial conflicts in Africa).

This stance had, however, implications beyond Eritrea, particularly for Tigrayans within Ethiopia, or more precisely, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Had linguistic, cultural, and historical similarity been the basis for imagining a new nation, then Tigray would surely have been combined with highland Eritrea. But this was not an option, for the Eritreans had already staked out their claim using the rhetoric of decolonisation. Consequently, the TPLF had to look elsewhere. First, it presented itself as a national movement dedicated to seceding from Ethiopia (as Tigrayans, they claimed, they were an oppressed minority within the Empire). But as the Cold War came to a close, and as the Marxist regime in Ethiopia began to crumble—leaving the Tigrayans as virtually the only political force with an army in the country—the TPLF recreated itself, this time as the champion of a 'democratic' transformation for all of Ethiopia. Having begun as Tigray nationalists, the only way they could accomplish this was through a system of official ethnic devolution of power. Each 'nation' within Ethiopia was given the right in theory (though doubtfully in practice) to rule itself and to secede if it wanted to.

This idea bounced back in turn upon the Eritreans, who of course had their own ethnic differences, but who like most other post-colonial states in Africa, wished to play these down in order to create a supposed national unity. According to Reid's analysis, the clash of these ideas about what it meant to be a 'people', did not in themselves cause the war of 1998–2000. Nonetheless, one cannot understand the violence that ensued without reference to this dialectic.

From the level of the nation, Jan Hultin's paper takes us to the region of western Ethiopia during the 1970s. When the TPLF took power in Ethiopia in the early 1990s (as the controlling element in a wider coalition called the EPRDF), they imagined the country as a collection of ethnic groups with long-standing consciousness of respective distinctivenesses. Hultin shows just how wrong such a view is, particularly with respect to the largest so-called ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Oromo. Until the Ethiopian revolution of 1974, in fact, most Oromo speakers in the west saw themselves in more local terms, such as Sibu or Leqa. It was the revolution of 1974 that encouraged identification with a larger Oromo identity, and Hultin was able to

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observe the very ritual moment at which new ethnic ideas became 'primordial', at least for some social actors.

In a meeting in July 1976, officers of the new revolutionary state shared the stage with local *luba* leaders (those who oversaw promotion ceremonies in the traditional grading system known as *gada*, previously suppressed by Haile Sellassie's regime). Blessings by the *luba* provoked a response that the revolutionary state did not anticipate. Hultin writes:

> The young men were singing and dancing in ecstatic joy . . . I had never seen anything [like it] . . . The evocative language of the two old men had apparently struck a deep chord of emotion and moral value . . . During the *luba*'s evocation, teachers and civil servants flocked at the stage with their tape-recorders to document the occasion . . . Only a few years earlier, they would have been completely uninterested in this kind of 'tradition'.

Threatened, the state responded. When people tried to revive the *gada* system a few months later, they were brutally suppressed and seven people were murdered. By the point the EPRDF government took over in the early 1990s, these ideas about Oromo collective identity had become stronger, at least among local elites (though it was by no means clear who should be qualified to represent the 'Oromo': the OLF or the EPRDF-affiliated OPDO). Beyond local elites, it is far less clear how many Oromo-speaking peasants identified themselves as 'Oromo' even by the end of the 1990s. In any case, the analytical point is that collective identities are produced and created, even as they are represented and sometimes experienced as found or given.

I conclude with Ben Knighton's paper on the Karamojong, a pastoral people in Uganda, considered after the events of 11 September 2001. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, the fear of terrorists—particularly those based in supposedly lawless areas of the world—had entirely replaced earlier fears of communists for North American policy-makers. In this context, Knighton describes an awful confluence of events in which Ugandan soldiers, supported by a new USAID programme to prevent cross-border conflicts in the Horn (and so to prevent the formation of terrorist zones), carried out a programme of murder and rape in order to disarm the Karamojong. After five thousand Karamojong escaped across the border into Kenya—vowing to avenge the wrongs perpetrated upon them by the Ugandan government—the conditions that the policy were designed to prevent had in fact been created.

Given differences in context and meaning, it would be foolhardy to read a series of 'lessons' from North-East Africa into the rest of the world. Perhaps all that one can say is that identity is never simply a matter for the collective self; it involves, as well, interpellation by others, located in various and potentially contradictory positions. In a world in which the only legitimate political order is now democracy, it is not surprising that local political elites are willing to claim this mantle—while carrying out actions that are profoundly undemocratic. The violence produced provides, in turn, one of the richer environments for

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the reformulation of local identity, in ways often unanticipated by policy-makers in centres of power and wealth.

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